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Matthew 15:1 - 15:9



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this session, Steve Gregg delves into the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of his time, focusing on the issue of washing hands. While the religious leaders wanted to ensure that people did not break the law, they also imposed strict traditions such as washing off past defilement. However, Jesus criticized the elders for focusing on tradition over God's commandments. Gregg notes that this conflict highlights the inherent authority of human tradition versus divine commandments. He also briefly touches on other biblical requirements, such as giving 10% of one's increase to the Lord and dedicating one's life to God.

Transcript

Today we're beginning a look at Matthew chapter 15, and there we have a very characteristic conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day. Jesus was not at all religious, if by religious we refer to ceremonies and rituals that are considered to have spiritual value, but which are really just traditions of some ecclesiastical organization. And that is what Judaism in his time had become.

Of course, there are many churches in Christendom that have become just like it, just like Judaism was in that time, in that they've got traditions that are revered as if they are the very essence of holiness and piety, when in fact they don't in any sense contribute to the holiness and piety that the Bible recommends. And that was the case with the Jewish people, at least with many of them in Jesus' day. The Pharisees in particular were great defenders of the traditions of the elders, as they were called.

The traditions of the elders were actually ideas that had been developed by the rabbis, and these traditions had originated probably in the Babylonian captivity over 500 years before Christ, when the Jews had been taken into Babylon away from Jerusalem. There was concern on the part of many of the Jewish teachers, the rabbis, that the Jewish people separated from the temple and separated from their heritage in Israel might pick up the ways of the pagans and might violate the laws of God. And so the rabbis began to develop more restrictive laws, more restrictive traditions to place on the people in order to, as they put it, build a hedge around the law.

They wanted to make sure that people not only didn't break the law, but that they didn't come close to breaking the law. So they put a hedge around the law by extending the restrictiveness of the law outward to restrict things that weren't restricted in the law. Now among the things that the Bible in the law did say was that if a person was unclean, and this uncleanness was something that was contracted by contact with a dead body or by possibly having a certain physical condition like leprosy, or if one had a continuing flow of blood from their body that was unnatural, or even if it was natural, if it was the monthly period of a woman, this would make her temporarily unclean.

Now uncleanness was not a state of moral defilement. God did not hold it against someone if they were a leper or if a woman had a period. But in the ceremonial ritual symbolism of Israel's law, these things rendered a person defiled in the sense that they had to be separated from both human company and from the tabernacle, from the worship of God for the period of their defilement.

In that sense, of course, defilement was a figure or a type, an image of sin. It is not sin itself, and people were never held accountable for being defiled, but it was a picture of sin. As sin separates us from man and God, breaks down our relationships with people and with God, so did this defilement separate the person so defiled from human company temporarily and from the tabernacle.

Well, at the end of a period of defilement, the law required that the person who had been unclean would end the period of uncleanness by taking a bath and washing their clothes. Now, this was symbolic of washing off all the past defilement of the previous period of time. Now, the rabbis had developed this into a much more elaborate requirement that any time somebody touched something that might defile them, and this list of things that might defile them was extended in the rabbis' minds beyond the things the Bible required.

For example, touching a Gentile was considered to be defiling, although the law of Moses didn't say so, yet the rabbis had decided that that would be so. And touching certain other things that the law did not require them not to touch was considered to be defiling. In fact, if the wind that blew across Samaria blew upon you, then you would be considered to be defiled.

If you had the dust of Samaria or of a Gentile land on your feet, it could defile you, according to the rabbis. Now, this was not really anything that agreed with the law. These were the traditions of men.

And because these things might happen to you, you might brush against a Gentile in the street, you might have the wind from Samaria blow across you without even knowing it. It was considered that you could hardly do any kind of business without becoming defiled. And therefore, the washing that the law required at the end of a period of defilement was extended to a daily, repeated washing.

That the rabbis, whenever they came indoors from being outside around people, they washed their hands and their elbows and other parts of their bodies and so forth. And this washing was not as you and I might wash if we've been out working in some dirty profession, if we've been getting greasy working under the car or working in the garden, our hands are covered with dirt. We wash when we come in because, well, we do that for hygienic reasons.

In their minds, hygiene had nothing to do with it. It had to do with ceremony. It had to do with removing a symbolic kind of defilement and not really with getting germs off your hands so that you could eat healthily or whatever.

So this is very important to understand as we approach this story in Matthew chapter 15, because Jesus came into conflict with them over this issue. In verse one, it says, Then the scribes and the Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus saying, Why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread. And by this they meant the disciples did not follow the ritual procedure of washing their hands.

But Jesus answered and said to them, Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God commanded, saying, Honor your father and your mother, and he who curses father or mother, let him be put to death. But you say, Whoever says to his father or mother, Whatever profit you might have received from me has been dedicated to the temple, is released from honoring his father or mother. Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition.

Hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying, These people draw near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. And in vain they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. Now I'm going to stop there for a moment.

The story continues, but I'm afraid it's going to get us into deep waters that we will not be able to cover in one session together here. So let me just stop and try to talk about these verses that have come before us so far. We're told that these people who raised the issue of the disciples not properly washing their hands were scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem.

Now, these men might have been from Jerusalem passing through Galilee on some business legitimately, but in all likelihood, these were spies that were sent from Jerusalem. Jesus was a controversial character. It was well known, first of all, that thousands of people were following him.

Secondly, it was well known that he was not at all on the team with the chief priests at the temple, nor on the team with the Pharisees, who were a different religious group. But these two groups, the chief priests and the Pharisees, would have been the most

influential leaders in religion of Judaism at that time, though they were of different parties because the chief priests were largely Sadducees, and that was a rival party to the Pharisees. But the Pharisees, they were curious to know what he was doing, and already before this time, they were plotting to kill him.

And so they were always looking for something to find fault with him about. And here they find something. This time it's not something that Jesus is doing particularly, but it's a sloppiness in terms of keeping the traditions of the elders on the part of his disciples.

Now, the assumption is that if a rabbi is a good rabbi, those who follow his teaching will be exemplary in terms of following the law of God and so forth. Now, if Jesus was really a good rabbi, he would be more concerned than he appeared to be about these disciples eating without following the traditional hand-washing customs. And so the criticism came to him about the disciples.

Why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders, for they do not wash their hands when they eat bread? Now, it's possible that the disciples didn't wash their hands at all when they ate bread, because remember, in those days, people were not aware, as we all are today, of the source of disease. Disease is caused, of course, by microbes for the most part, and these microbes were not even known to exist before the days of Pasteur. And even in Pasteur's day, many of his contemporaries laughed at him when he suggested that there were invisible little microorganisms that were causing infection and disease.

And this was only, what, a couple centuries ago? Now, 2,000 years ago, people didn't have a clue what caused disease. Some people had superstitious ideas, and some people just probably had a blank in their mind and just thought it was bad luck. But people did not wash their hands in those days before they ate for the purpose of avoiding disease, because they had no idea about the relationship of disease and filth on the hands or anywhere else in the house or whatever.

The problem here was that the disciples were not following the custom, and washing the hands, in this case, was quite elaborate. The Pharisees would pour the water over one hand as it was positioned in a certain way, and then position it another way and pour it down over the elbow, and do the same with the other hand, and it was all really standardized. The disciples were not religious men.

They were fishermen and tax collectors and so forth. They didn't come from a religious background. They'd never been of the party of the Pharisees, and therefore they never really had been at pains to learn these rituals.

And yet the Pharisees considered themselves to be on the cutting edge of spirituality, because they were mindful of these rituals and inconvenienced themselves every day to follow them. In the parallel story to this in Mark's Gospel, in Mark chapter 7, it says in

verse 2, Now when they saw some of his disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, unwashed hands, they found fault. And then Mark tells us this, This is Mark 7. In verse 4 it says, And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches.

So Mark, by the way, is writing to a Gentile audience. Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience. When Matthew tells us that Jesus' disciples received criticism for not washing their hands in the ritual way, Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience who would have no problem understanding the nature of that complaint.

But Mark is writing to Gentiles who would not be familiar with the Jewish customs on this, and so Mark gives a couple of verses of explanation about what really lies behind this criticism. Anyway, the criticism was, And Jesus comes back at them in verse 3, Matthew 15, 3, by saying, Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? Now, which is a more severe criticism, that a person transgresses the tradition of the elders, or that a person transgresses the commandments of God? Obviously, the authority of the elders, who are human, is all that lies behind the one, the traditions, and the authority of God himself lies behind his commandments. Now, Jesus says, Now, you folks, you are, as it were, straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel.

Now, he didn't say that on this occasion, though he did say those exact words in Matthew 23, 24. But the idea is that you are majoring on minors, and you're neglecting the more important things. You are keeping human traditions, but you're neglecting God's own commandments, and in some cases, you do so in order to keep your traditions.

It is possible that the traditions of the elders, when kept scrupulously, would lead someone into a violation of what God actually has commanded to do. And that's what Jesus said the Pharisees on occasion did. He gives an example.

He says, For God commanded, saying, Honor your father and your mother, and he who curses father or mother, let him be put to death. These are actually quotes from two different passages in the law. Honor your father and mother, of course, is from the Ten Commandments.

And he that curses father or mother, let him be put to death comes up later on in Exodus. But it says, But you say, Whoever says to his father or mother, Whatever profit you might have received from me has been dedicated to the temple, that person is released from honoring his father and his mother. Now, let me try to explain what this is all about.

In the law, it was possible to dedicate things to God. And by doing so, it meant dedicating them to the temple. In those days, people had pretty simple lives.

And most of the possessions they had were either servants or livestock or the produce of their farm or even maybe relatives. And it was possible that you could dedicate something that you owned to God, but something that you were not required to dedicate to him. You see, the law required that people give 10% of their increase to the Lord and required that the first fruits be given to the Lord and required that the firstborn of every animal and every child would be the Lord's.

But beyond that, if a person wanted to be particularly zealous for God, they could dedicate more than that to God. They could give God instead of 10%. They could dedicate 20% or 50% if they wished.

Now, that would be going beyond anything that God required. It would be just a matter of doing it out of special devotion to God. And so the law indicated that a person could devote something to God that they were not required to devote to God.

And in doing so, it would come into the custody of the priest in the temple. You might remember that Hannah in the Old Testament dedicated her son even before he was born to God. That was Samuel.

And what that meant was that when he was born and when he had reached an age where he could leave his mother, he was to go and serve in the temple. And that's what it meant to dedicate something to God. Now, it wasn't all that often, I suppose, that they dedicated human beings to God like that, although some people might have dedicated servants of theirs and so forth.

But to dedicate an animal or some other possession of theirs to God, what it really meant was that whatever was dedicated to God could not be used for ordinary purposes. It had to be devoted to the temple. It had to be devoted to God's service.

Now, what Jesus said these Pharisees were doing was this. Now, the law of God says you need to honor your father and your mother. And Jesus assumed that that would be one manifestation of honoring your father and mother would be if your parents were in need and you had something you could help them with, then you should help them out.

You should financially help them. That would be part of honoring your father and your mother. Paul taught the same thing in 1 Timothy 5. He said that if a widow has children who can support them, then these children ought to repay their parents and support them.

And anyone who would not do so is worse than an unbeliever and had denied the faith. So it's very clear that honoring one's parents includes helping your parents when they are in need and you have the ability to help them. But the Pharisees, what they had done was said, Well, you know, what if I don't want to help my parents? What if I don't like my parents? What if I really am not on good terms with my parents and they are in

need and I have what it takes to help them? Well, what I could do is this surplus I have of goods.

Now, most people didn't so much have surplus of money as their possessions were in the form of livestock and grain and so forth. They could say, Well, these extra cattle I have, which I could, of course, use to help my parents out. I could sell them or give them to my parents.

I'll dedicate them to the temple instead. And by doing so, it would mean that I couldn't give them to my parents. They can't be used for ordinary purposes like that.

And, of course, he didn't even have to give them to the temple right away. He could say, I've dedicated these to the temple and say, But I'll, of course, a few years from now, I'll give them to the temple. In the meantime, he might get calves from them and be enriched by keeping them.

And he would not be helping his parents because he claimed that these things were dedicated to God. Now, I think it's possible for that to happen today, for people to find religious excuses for not doing what God says to do. You see, by dedicating these things to God, they were seeming pious, but they were neglecting the command of God that said to honor your father and mother.

I have known wives who do not submit to their husbands, although the command of God is that they should, because they feel like their husbands are not spiritual enough and that they, the wives, are doing something more religious, something more godly, than what obeying their husbands would be, their religious work or whatever, even though their husbands may disapprove of some of it. There are women who feel, Well, I'm going to have to go over my husband's head on this one because I'm dedicating this service to God. When I was a teenager, I had long hair, and I was in a Christian rock band, and my parents didn't like my long hair.

And I felt like, Well, that's their problem. You know, this is for God. This is a ministry thing.

This is dedicated to the Lord. And, you know, I had an argument with my father about that once when I was 17 years old. And I left that argument, went into my room, and opened my Bible for my nightly Bible reading, which I did every night, and I came to this story.

And I found this story of these people who, instead of giving their parents what their parents needed and desired, they dedicated that to God so that they wouldn't have to honor their parents. And I realized that that's exactly what I was doing. And, of course, I went out and cut my hair after that because I was saying, This long hair, that's dedicated to God.

It's for the use of the ministry. But, in fact, it was kept at the expense of honoring my parents. So people need to see whether they are using religious excuses for violating the commands of God.

Jesus said that by doing this, the Pharisees, as he put it, you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. That is, you've kept it something, a religious tradition, and made God's word have no effect in your life. Traditions can nullify the word of God in your life, and you don't want that to happen.

Jesus said, Hypocrites, well, did Isaiah prophesy about you? Now, Isaiah really prophesied about his own generation, but Jesus is saying that the Jews of his generation were exactly like those of Isaiah's generation, about whom Isaiah said, These people draw near to me, this is God speaking, with their mouth, and they honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. They act religious, and they keep religious traditions, but their hearts are not really devoted to obeying God, and paying the price of dying to themselves, and doing what God really wants them to do. Instead, they use religion as an excuse to do what they want to do.

And Isaiah continues with God speaking, And in vain they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. Now, notice what Jesus said, and he's quoting Isaiah, but Jesus approves of it. There are people who worship God, they sing praises to God, with their mouths they draw near to him, but their heart's not really with him, and their worship of him is in vain, because they are following religious traditions rather than obeying what God said.

You know, there are traditions of every denomination. There's even charismatic traditions, and they come and go. But the thing is that any tradition, religious, denominational, or whatever, if it makes you think that you are spiritual, because you're keeping that tradition, but you neglect what God has actually said to do, then you are worshipping God, according to Jesus, in vain.

That means you're worshipping emptily. God does not accept it. You're putting out the effort.

You're doing the work of worship, but it's empty. God does not accept it. You're worshipping in vain.

Wouldn't that be a terrible thing, to stand before God someday and say, God, I worshipped you. I cast out demons in your name. I prophesied in your name.

I did mighty works in your name, and have him say, I never knew you. That was all in vain. Well, Jesus, of course, in Matthew 7 said, There will be many who will have that experience.

And that is the effect of being traditional, following traditions of men, and mistaking

them for godliness. We're going to continue this story next time. We've run out of time this time, but we're going to see the sequel when we get back together next time.